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Response to McFague

Rachel Coyne
Macalester College

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Response

Rachel Coyne

I would like to begin by identifying what I feel are the major strengths of both Dr. McFague's paper and her other works, notably *The Body of God*, in which she details the ideas she presents here.

The first of these strengths is Dr. McFague's ability to bring new life to Christian doctrine. In a way, I feel that her work is much like that of an artisan, busily restoring an old-master painting to its former glory. Industriously, she is cleaning away centuries of grime and misuse in order to reveal once again to the world the true grandeur and beauty of Christianity. I feel that it is necessary for us to appreciate the enormity of this task, a task that, above all, requires the courage to turn sacred texts on their heads and shake the sense out of them, the way most people would turn an ordinary pair of blue jeans inside out, in order to find the coins hidden in the pockets. The result of this important work is a new poetry lent to the Scriptures and a new sense of urgency that Christianity must address the concerns of the world in which it plays a part.

The second strength is Dr. McFague's eagerness to embrace a subject that many theologians of various philosophies and religions, along with many specialists in diverse secular fields, have long placed outside of their direct field of concern or inquiry. Dr. McFague, like many theologians, looks heavenward to seek God, but unlike most, she does not find Him reclining on His throne in the New Jerusalem; instead, she finds Him hiding among the greenhouse gases and CO₂ molecules.

While I readily praise the wealth of ideas in Dr. McFague's work, I must confess to having several strong reservations and questions. To begin, she ponders at length on whether there *is* a Christian basis for addressing global environmental concerns and *how* Christianity could help us imagine a lifestyle that is more environmentally friendly, but not once does she appear to wonder whether Christianity *should*, considering its history, be advanced as an environmental solution or whether it *can* legitimately be thrown into the debate without jeopardizing the already delicate lines of accord drawn up among diverse peoples who may or may not have a positive relation with the West and Christianity.

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To elaborate, let us consider the model of the poor Third World woman of color, who Dr. McFague identifies as the “representative human being of the twenty-first century” and the “barometer of the health of humanity and of nature.”¹ Let us give this woman flesh and history: say she is a Native American woman, somewhere in the First World on a Third World reservation. Let’s be even more specific: she is an Anishinabae who lives on the Sand Lake Reservation in Wisconsin. She has, no doubt, suffered under the “arrogant [Western] eye that objectifies others for its own benefit.”² This is speaking in the abstract. To turn once again to the more specific, over the last five hundred years, she and her people have experienced a loss of land brought about by Christian settlers, whose western migration displaced the members of more eastern tribes. They, in turn, displaced the Anishinabae, who would themselves displace their western neighbors. She has lost traditional means of livelihood and access to natural resources, also to Christian settlers, whose particular religious outlook proposed “dominion over nature” as one of its most basic tenets. She has also been deprived, for the most part, of her ancestors’ language and traditions due to an American government policy that removed native children from their homes and “reeducated” them in Christian boarding schools where they were not allowed to speak their native languages or practice their religious beliefs.

I am not proposing this story in an attempt to bemoan the past, rather self-evident evils of Christianity. Rather, my intention is to suggest that while Dr. McFague appears to view Christianity as somehow outside Western thought or separated from the Western project, for many, including myself, such a separation is difficult to see. For hundreds of years, from the Crusades to Manifest Destiny in the Americas, Christianity has been the fuel in the ideological engine of Western aggression. Before Christianity can propose a future for our planet, it must first come to terms with its past. If it is not compelled to do so out of a sense of justice, it must do so in order to avoid splintering the very movement it hopes to create. The environmental crisis is such a serious issue that it deserves to be looked at in and of itself and not as an appendage to age-old human strifes between Christian and Muslim, Animist and Christian, etc.

Perhaps Dr. McFague’s response to these concerns would be that the Christianity she proposes is not the Christianity of a hundred or

even fifty years ago. In her work, Dr. McFague bravely embraces a Christianity that breaks away from many of its traditional patriarchal and hierarchical practices, a passion that manifests itself in her rejection of subject-object dualisms.

However, despite these reforms, the Christianity that Dr. McFague offers us in order to save the environment still looks suspiciously like the Christianity that endangered the environment in the first place. Can a largely intact Christianity serve such an important purpose? I advance here the notion that if Christianity over the past 2,000 years has not managed to convince its followers to obey its most basic commandment, to love one another, it is unlikely that it will persuade them to make the sweeping changes needed to save the environment in the critical next fifty years.

Much of Dr. McFague's paper focuses on the "arrogant eye" of Christianity and the West and on the problems associated with subject-object dualisms. I do not deny the importance of this work. I suggest, however, that while these are certainly two troubling stumbling blocks on the road to a more environmentally friendly Christianity, they are not the only factors that stand in the way of spiritual sister-/brotherhood.

Many of these troubling aspects of Christianity remain unchallenged in Dr. McFague's thinking. To be more specific, she advances subject-subjects thinking over subject-object thinking, placing the reader in a situation where she is limited to two choices. This particular duality echoes Christianity's conflict between good and evil, creating a black-and-white situation in which an individual is encouraged to exercise her will to rectify the situation. The main motivations behind her choice seem to be guilt and fear—not of an angry God but of an environmentally destroyed world and fear of future generations' reproach. But are there only two choices? Are the lines between good and evil so clearly demarcated? Are fear and guilt truly the best motivators of human will? Is there such a thing as individual will? Is our obsession with an individual's choice purely Western in origin? In the context of this brief response, I do not have the space to do more than pose these questions. Instead, I will focus on one specific issue—that of the choice between good and evil and the dualistic view of the world that it proposes.

The dichotomy between subject-subjects and subject-object thinking is only one of many dualisms that Dr. McFague has established in her paper. Dr. McFague describes herself as a First World Christian. It is

easy to draw out the natural opposites of this identity — she is neither Third World nor non-Christian. Furthermore, Dr. McFague outlines several dualisms for us quite clearly — human-nature, male-female, North-South, White-People of Color, etc. — as part of her discussion of empathy, urging Christians to identify and ascribe value to the bottom half of these hierarchies. While clearly acknowledging the harm caused by ascribing value to one half of the dualism over the other, Dr. McFague does not take the next step of questioning the existence of the dualism itself.

* * * * *

What is wrong with dualistic thinking? To begin, it is often untenable because it lumps diverse people and concepts together on one side of a dualism, thus all that is not human is simply nature, when the very concept of nature encompasses such diverse things as rocks, plants, animals, and oceans. People of Color are contrasted with Whites, reducing such diverse people as the Inuits and the Zulu to the same category as “different from White.” This is especially relevant when one considers that of our total world population, non-First World members and non-Christians number about four billion. It must be pointed out that people on the more valued side of these dualisms suffer as well. If love is, as Dr. McFague has so eloquently advanced, the ability to acknowledge something outside of oneself as real, and if the act of loving someone involves the struggle to see someone clearly, then clinging to such thought structures interferes with our ability to value the world’s environment.

Furthermore, I believe that dualistic thinking presents Dr. McFague with a difficult barrier to the environmentally sound Christianity she hopes to achieve. She shares with us a story about turtles, narrating a part of her own journey toward a greater empathy with those at the bottom half of Western, dualistic hierarchies. I would like to share another turtle story as an illustration of the limits of empathy and the concept of otherness.

The Earth on Turtle's Back

an Onondaga tale

as retold by

Joseph Bruchac³

Before this Earth existed, there was only water.

It stretched as far as one could see, and in that water there were birds and animals swimming around. Far above, in the clouds, there was a Skyland. In that Skyland there was a great and beautiful tree. It had four white roots which stretched to each of the sacred directions, and from its branches all kinds of fruits and flowers grew.

There was an ancient chief in the Skyland. His young wife was expecting a child, and one night she dreamed that she saw the Great Tree uprooted. The next morning she told her husband the story.

He nodded as she finished telling her dream. "My wife," he said, "I am sad that you had this dream. It is clearly a dream of great power and, as is our way, when one has such a powerful dream we must do all that we can to make it come true. The Great Tree must be uprooted."

Then the ancient chief called the young men together and told them that they must pull up the tree. But the roots of the tree were so deep, so strong, that they could not budge it. At last the ancient chief himself came to the tree. He wrapped his arms around it, bent his knees and strained. At last, with one great effort, he uprooted the tree and placed it on its side. Where the tree's roots had gone deep into the Skyland there was now a big hole. The wife of the chief came close and leaned over to look down, grasping the tip of one of the Great Tree's branches to steady her. It seemed as if she saw something down there, far below, glittering like water. She leaned out further to look and, as she leaned, she lost her balance and fell into the hole. Her hand slipped off the tip of the branch, leaving her with only a handful of seeds as she fell down, down, down, down.

Far below, in the waters, some of the birds and animals looked up.

"Someone is falling toward us from the sky," said one of the birds.

"We must do something to help her," said another. Then two Swans flew up. They caught the Woman From The Sky between their wide wings. Slowly, they began to bring her down toward the water, where the birds and animals were watching.

"She is not like us," said one of the animals. "Look, she doesn't have webbed feet. I don't think she can live in the water."

"What shall we do, then?" said another of the water animals.

"I know," said one of the water birds. "I have heard that there is Earth far below the waters. If we dive down and bring up Earth, then she will have a place to stand."

So the birds and animals decided that someone would have to bring up Earth. One by one they tried.

The Duck dove down first, some say. He swam down and down, far beneath the surface, but could not reach the bottom and floated back up. Then the Beaver tried. He went even deeper, so deep that it was all dark, but he could not reach the bottom, either. The Loon tried, swimming with his strong wings. He was gone a long, long time, but he, too, failed to bring up Earth. Soon it seemed that all had tried and all had failed. Then one small voice spoke. "I will bring up Earth or die trying."

They looked to see who it was. It was the tiny Muskrat. She dove down and swam and swam. She was not as strong or as swift as the others, but she was determined. She went so deep that it was all dark, and still she swam deeper. She went so deep that her lungs felt ready to burst, but she swam deeper still. At last, just as she was becoming unconscious, she reached out one small paw and grasped at the bottom, barely touching it before she floated up, almost dead.

When the other animals saw her break the surface they thought she had failed. Then they saw her right paw was held tightly shut.

"She has the Earth," they said. "Now where can we put it?"

"Place it on my back," said a deep voice. It was the Great Turtle, who had come up from the depths.

They brought the Muskrat over the Great Turtle and placed her paw against his back. To this day there are marks at the back of Turtle's shell which were made by Muskrat's paw. The tiny bit of Earth fell on the back of the Turtle. Almost immediately, it began to grow larger and larger and larger until it became the whole world.

Then the two Swans brought the Sky Woman down. She stepped onto the new earth and opened her hand, letting the seeds fall onto the bare soil. From those seeds the trees and the grass sprang up. Life on Earth had begun.

* * * * *

The difference between the two stories is clear: While Dr. McFague describes a rather limited experience with a turtle in which she was a strange visitor to an often inaccessible world, the Onondaga tale paints Turtle and other animals as being at the bedrock or foundation of the world. In this and many other Native stories, animals are often portrayed as equals to human beings. Animals and forces of nature are intelligences to be reckoned with.

Through the two stories, it becomes clear that it is one thing to have empathy with animals and quite another to operate in a system of values in which one admits that he *is* an animal, that he will die as an animal and that his life serves as much purpose as (and occasionally less than) a muskrat or turtle. With belief in the coming Kingdom of God and the ascendancy of the human spirit or soul, I believe that this is an admission that Christianity cannot make. This, then, becomes a chasm between Dr. McFague's philosophy and the very point she identifies as her goal. Similar distances exist between the other dualisms previously discussed. We must always recognize that it is one thing to empathize with the poor and another thing to be poor or a Person of Color or a resident of the Third World.

My experiences at Macalester have taught me many things. Recently, in my work as an international mentor for newly arriving international students, I came to know several Americans who had been raised almost entirely abroad and who were just beginning the sometimes painful adjustment to American culture. I saw them in the process of confronting these dualisms in an effort to build an identity. Were they of the North or South, East or West, rich or poor, White or other? In our highly mobile and interconnected world, I feel that such people are hardly unusual and becoming more common by the day. In fact, during my recent studies at the Universite des Antilles et de Guyane in Martinique, I learned that ambiguity in the face of Western dichotomies has long been a way of life in the Caribbean and is, in fact, the hallmark of the Creole culture of which the Martiniquais and Martiniquaises are fiercely proud.

Therefore, my contribution to this discussion is to encourage people to seek out not only answers to seminal questions, but also to pursue new ways of answering them. I encourage the reader to pursue his/her studies not under the framework of how one must react to the world, but rather how one *is* the world and *is in* the world.

Finally, I would like to end by once again thanking Dr. McFague for her thought-provoking work; I recognize that my task has been easy in comparison to hers. It is always simpler to tear down than to build up. It is my hope that these few remarks will aid in the further strengthening of what I feel is an important and well-intentioned work.

Notes

1. Sallie McFague, "The Loving Eye vs. the Arrogant Eye: A Christian Critique of the Western Gaze on Nature and the Third World" *Macalester International* 6 (Spring 1998), 80.
2. Ibid.
3. Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Native American Stories Told by Joseph Bruchac* (Gordon, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1991).